Vietnamese politeness and impoliteness

Despite their contacts and dealings with the Western people for about a century the Vietnamese still keep and observe their traditional rules of politeness which are quite similar to those of the Chinese and other Asian people, since they all have been deeply impregnated with confucianism and Asian culture.

However, Vietnamese politeness is today not so rigorous as that observed by the Japanese and the Chinese. The Vietnamese people are not accustomed, for instance, to greet their guests with a low bow or deep pending of the body as the Japanese nor are they in the habit of joining their hands on their breasts and inclining their heads to make a profound reverence as the Chinese. However, hand-shaking is today practised by those who have received education from Western schools though it is of European custom.
In the old times politeness was considered more important than education itself. Pupils and students of Confucian school were taught to "Tien hoc le, hau hoc van." Such an advice has become by itself almost a rule since everybody must bear it in mind in order to conduct himself correctly under all circumstances and with people from all walks of life.

Confucian morals prescribed respect firstly for one's emperor, secondly for one's teacher and thirdly for one's father (quan, sur, phop). Such a hierarchy was strictly observed in family, at school and in society.

At home every man must respect and obey his father. He must be grateful to the man who has brought him into the world, provided for his foods, clothing until he grows up and becomes a man. All the care dispensed by a father to his son is comparable to the height of mount of Thai-Son (Cong chia nhu nui Thai-Son). Any failure to perform one's filial duty is considered as an abominable crime.

But he owes his education to his teacher who forged his character, made him a man capable of earning his living by himself and holding a high position in society by teaching him literature, philosophy, wisdom and moral ethics. He must respect him above his father.

In the old days, the emperor was given pride of place. He was the man to be respected most and above all, who reigned over his country and governed both his teacher and father. He was the son of God (Thien tr) endowed with immense wisdom, talent and power and destined to rule over the country.

VIETNAMESE POLITENESS

Bad behavior or lack of politeness is also detrimental to one's reputation. A man endowed with gift and talent will not be welcome nor held in esteem if he misconducts himself.

* Respect the old and you will enjoy longevity. (Kinh lo di tr ho) is also a recommendation to the young who often overlook their duties towards the old.

All this substantial shows that Vietnamese rules politeness are mainly inspired by Confucianism.

Vietnamese politeness is also quite subtle. When a man speaks of himself and anything he possesses, he should qualify them humble, poor, ugly, while he calls deary noble, nice, perfectly made everything owned by the person to whom he speaks and writes.

A man who invites his friends to a dinner at his home, for instance, on the occasion of his daughter's marriage would write the invitation card as follows:

* We have the honor to invite you and your dear wife to come to our modest house (t xa) and take a light drink (chua ruvu nhat) on the occasion of my daughter's marriage etc...

On the new years day he would wish his friend and his family by saying: * I respectfully wish you and your dear (or noble) family (qu yeu) a happy new year etc...*

To express an idea, an opinion one would say in my humble opinion, in my poor thinking, (the xin x cua toi).

If a man did not agree with his interlocutor upon a certain matter he would say, instead of objecting directly: *May
I ask your permission, or kindly permit me to tell you this etc... (xin man phép, xin lỗi ông) or * with your permission, I think that the matter would be this etc... * (trọn nghĩ rằng).

Modesty is also required for expressing thankfulness. When a man thanks another for a service rendered or for a favor done, the latter accepts it but always says with modesty: * I dare not, sir* (Tối không dám). To say that he dares not receive or he is not worthy of so many thanks. Such an expression * I dare not * is often used by the people of the North and the Centre of this country while the Southerners prefer to say: * There is nothing * (đã không có chi), which is equivalent to * never mind it, * or * don't mention it *.

Such a way of expressing one's modesty is still often used by the northerners to answer a greeting. When a young man or an inferior says * Good day, sir. * to greet an old man or a superior, the latter often returns the greeting with modesty by:

*I dare not, good day, sir. * (Tối không dám, chào ông) to mean that he dares not accept such an expression of respect, or he does not deserve so much respect. Far be it from him to be hostile to the greeting but he accots it with modesty, thinking however, he does not really, deserve it. But the southerners are more realistic. They return the greeting by a simple: * Yes, good day, sir.* (Đà, chào ông).

Vietnamese is a language based on hierarchy, so to speak and to different people, different terms are used. Those who, know Japanese can have a better idea of this hierarchic discrimination. So, a Vietnamese's opinion of a man, a people, a country, can be really assessed only through an understanding of the level at which he talks about them. This is especially true of the man in the street, the one that really matters. Thus, if you want to find out how the Vietnamese people, that is the majority, think about you and your country, don't spend your time at cocktail parties or dining with the families of high officials or rich merchants. Get into the streets, and listen to the cyclo drivers, the street boys the low officials talking among themselves.

When talking about a country and its people if they used the word ngụ dì, then that denotes a certain respect. Thus, if they say ngụ dì Mỹ (the American) or ngụ dì Pháp (the French), then you may report home that the USA or France enjoy consideration and respect in Vietnam. But if they use the word tuì (the fellows from), then it is not so respectful. Thus, if they say tuì Mỹ (the fellows from America) tuì Pháp (the fellows from France) then you may report home that the Vietnamese do not think very highly of your country. Again when the use tuì nd for they, then it is not so complimentary to your people either.

But it is only when it comes to individuals that the Vietnamese language is really expressive. Thus if you are referred to as cha dố (that man), then you may be proud, because that phrase expresses a reluctant expression of respect. Next to cha dố is thằng cha dố; this phrase is rather neutral. It expresses neither respect nor disrespect, although one thing is certain: you are not among those who may pass up to the category of the cha. If they use the phrase thằng dố (that lowly fellow), then you must really start searching your conscience to discover what you have done to be so disliked or so despised by the cyclo drivers or the newboys.
But when people refer to you as ông cúng or ông phó then you may be really proud of yourself. The equivalent for a female would be bà phó or bà cúng which means that lady. But if you are a women, and the Vietnamese man in the street refers to you as con phó vagy con phó phó then you should really ask yourself why it is that the Vietnamese man in the street puts you in the category almost of the street walkers.

Lastly whether you are a man or a woman, when the Vietnamese use the term họa then it means that they respect you, especially when they are not under professional obligation of being polite to you. If they simply say ông or bà (Mr., Madame) then they mean that they treat you decently, but not necessarily with inner respect.

The family and filial duties

The basic Vietnamese family is composed of a man, his wife and his children. They form a nhà or gia (literally: a house).

Many such families, if they descend from a common ancestor, form a clan called họ or tổ. Each clan is a cell of the Vietnamese society and extends to nine generations from the great-great-great-grandfather to the great-great-grandsons.

A clan is divided into many branches called chi, but includes only the direct branches and the male collaterals and excludes the allied.

The head of the oldest branch is by right the head of the clan. If he dies prematurely; he is replaced by his eldest son or by the head of the closest collateral branch. If his son is still minor and cannot fulfill the duties and responsibilities of the head of the clan another man can be selected to assist him.
A family council can recommend a man, taking into consideration his age, position in society and closeness to the clan, to act as an assistant.

The head of clan is the person mainly responsible for carrying out veneration of ancestors. A temple or altar is erected in his house and homage is paid to ancestors up through four ascending generations: the father and mother, the grand father and mother, the great-grand father and mother and the great-great grand father and mother.

All members of a clan gather at its chief’s house to perform the veneration ceremony on the anniversary of the death of each ancestor. Many other feast days in the year also provide occasion for family gatherings: the eve of the Tet holidays, wandering souls day on the 15th of the 7th lunar month, the mid-autumn festival on the 15th of the 8th lunar month and other holidays.

Each ceremony and gathering, of course, is expensive with costs born by the head of the clan. But in compensation he has the use of a part of the clan’s patrimony called "của hương hoá", or "property for incense and fire".

Such property might be a piece of land, house or other real estate. It cannot be disposed of by any person except the head of the clan, nor be sold without the concurrence of clan members gathered in family council.

It is also the job of the head of the clan to keep the family genealogy. He must maintain an up-to-date record of deceased members in accordance with their filial relationship, dates or births and deaths, titles, positions in society, places of burial and names of the wives who give birth to male children. This record is the genealogical tree or "gia phả".

Another record of the same nature and type is also made by the elder son of each lower branch and is reserved for the dead.

Names of the living members are entered in another book from the time they reach the age of 13 to the time they die. Such a book is kept as an addition to the other record.

This means that a Vietnamese clan is a much larger community than a family, on one in which both the living and the dead are bound by a close relationship.

The dead, up through the four ascending generations, are believed to have seats on the altar dedicated to their ancestors and their descendants who still within the clan.

Each member of the community believes that his good and bad deeds and his general behaviour are witnessed and judged by his ancestors. In times of success he thanks them for helping and blessing him, in misfortune he appeals to them by prayers and offerings for help and protection.

In the Vietnamese family, the bond that ties the living with the dead is filial piety, a basic virtue of Confucian ethics practiced by veneration of the ancestors.

Any failure in fulfilling filial duty is considered a crime and dying without issue is a great misfortune. It is every family member’s duty to strive for fame and wealth to increase his clan’s reputation and prosperity.
MANNERS AT TABLE

At such a meal, the guest is free to choose the dishes he likes and refuse those he feels reluctant to taste.

Being an unexpected guest, one must remember that the hostess has an extra person to feed, so one must eat sparingly. The best way to avoid embarrassment is to accept the invitation only after the family has just begun its meal. But it also would be a bad policy to refuse an invitation without a good apology. The family would doubt the guest’s sincerity and think he had no confidence in its cooking.

To celebrate important events, banquets or official dinners are often given. Some common rules of courtesy should be observed, especially when Chinese foods are served.

Take care not to be late. Arriving at the party and seeing older men and women present, one should greet them before the younger guests. Shake hands only if the people indicate that they like it. Elderly people, women and girls are unaccustomed to handshaking, either with their compatriots or with foreigners. However, women and girls who have been abroad or are married to foreigners like the European custom of shaking hands.

If the banquet consists of Chinese foods, each guest has a complete place setting including a bowl, a spoon, a pair of chopsticks, a small container for sauces and spices and a small glass of alcohol.

Foods are brought in one after another, in tureens or on platters. The guests should wait until they are invited by the host to begin drinking and eating. They do not fill their glasses themselves. Either the host or the waiters will take care of this, especially the first glass.
Speeches are usually delivered at the beginning of the meal. When every thing is ready and the foods brought in, the guests look at the contents of the tureens or platters on the middle of the table and pick up the desired morsels with their chopsticks or their spoons. It is not polite to spend time picking and probing.

Each guest uses his own spoon to transfer soups or liquids from the large bowl to his individual bowl. Guests do not eat directly from the big bowls.

Sometimes a guest may refrain from taking a food he doesn’t like. However, the host may be unaware of his guest’s likes and dislikes and may place some undesired food in the individual bowl. In this case, the guest must eat it up. His refusal would make the host doubt his sincerity and think he required coaxing.

Guests are served by waitresses. Dishes are usually taken away only when empty but it is especially polite when the guest leaves something in each of them. This assures the host that enough food has been prepared for the banquet and that everybody has eaten to his satisfaction.

If a guest picks too much at certain food which does not please his taste, he should ask to have his bowl changed. The waiter will take away what he leaves, but it is more respectful to eat everything so that nothing is left in one’s bowl until the end of the banquet.

Marriage

According to popular belief, a young Vietnamese man of 21 and a girl of 17 have arrived at the ideal time of life of marriage.

By the same token, the ages of 20 for young men and 18 for girls are unfavourable for marriage and should be avoided, if possible.

In the countryside, children of well-to-do parents tend to marry early because they have the guarantee of parental support during their first years together. Children of poor parents, however, must wait until they have accumulated adequate funds, so they are apt to have passed the ideal age when they marry.

In Viet Nam, marriage is aimed at perpetuating the name of the family and continuing the cult of the ancestors. True happiness in ‘old age is for parents’ to see all their children married and to have many grand-children in their home.